

The Politics of Terrorism: Power, Sympathy, and the Selective Application of Law

Few words in modern political discourse carry more weight — or ambiguity — than “terrorism.” It is at once a moral condemnation, a legal classification, and a justification for violence or repression. It is also, crucially, **a political weapon**, deployed selectively and often inconsistently. Despite dozens of international agreements and definitions, there remains no universally accepted legal standard for what constitutes terrorism — not because the concept is inherently elusive, but because the **label itself is shaped by power**.

At the heart of this inconsistency lies a dangerous double standard: **the actions of non-state actors are readily condemned as terrorism**, while **functionally identical acts by recognized states are sanitized under terms like “military operation,” “reprisal,” or “collateral damage.”** This is not merely semantic — it profoundly affects who is deemed legitimate, whose violence is accepted, and whose suffering is recognized.

The Palestinian struggle offers a clear and sustained illustration of this double standard. When Palestinians use violence — whether to resist occupation, reclaim land, or protest systemic disenfranchisement — it is almost universally labeled “terrorism” by dominant powers. When Israeli forces employ disproportionate force, bomb refugee camps, assassinate leaders abroad, or enable settler pogroms, the response is typically framed in the language of national security, not terrorism.

This essay argues that **the application of the terrorism label is not primarily legal, but political**. It reflects the **interests and sympathies of powerful states**, not the consistent application of legal norms. Moreover, it suggests that the **Palestinian demand for equal treatment under international law mirrors the foundational struggle of the Enlightenment**: the rejection of arbitrary privilege and the insistence that **law must apply equally to all** — individuals, peoples, and states alike.

UNGA Resolution 49/60 and the Legal Definition of Terrorism

Adopted in 1994, **United Nations General Assembly Resolution 49/60** sought to define terrorism in a universal way. Its annexed Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism condemns:

“Criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particu-

lar persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.”

Crucially, the resolution **does not distinguish between state and non-state actors** in its definition. The criteria are clear: **intentional violence against civilians** designed to **intimidate, coerce, or compel political outcomes** constitutes terrorism. In principle, this could apply to any actor — state or otherwise.

In practice, however, the resolution has **almost never been applied to state actions**, even when they meet the definition precisely. The reason is not legal ambiguity. The reason is **political reluctance** to name and shame powerful states or their allies. When non-state actors engage in such behavior, the label “terrorism” is immediate and unyielding. When states do — especially recognized, militarily dominant, or geopolitically aligned states — the label is conspicuously absent.

State vs. Non-State: A Double Standard in Application

Numerous operations conducted by Israeli state forces — from the pre-state Haganah and Irgun to the modern IDF and Mossad — have involved the **targeting of civilians, the use of collective punishment, and assassinations abroad**. Under the strict criteria of UNGA 49/60, many of these actions **fit the definition of terrorism**:

- The **Qibya massacre** (1953): 69 Palestinian civilians killed, mostly women and children, as part of a punitive raid to “deter infiltration.”
- The **Gaza campaigns** (2008, 2014, 2021, 2023–25): Thousands of civilians killed, UN schools and hospitals bombed, food and water blockades imposed — often justified as counter-terrorism, despite their impact being indistinguishable from acts meant to **intimidate an entire population**.
- The **Wrath of God assassinations** (1970s): Car bombs and mail bombs used to kill suspected militants — and, in some cases, civilians — across Europe and the Middle East.
- The **enabling of settler violence**: From pogroms in towns like Huwara to systemic attacks on Palestinian farmers and children, settler violence is regularly met with **military protection or indifference**, effectively sanctioning it as an arm of state policy.

None of these actions are ever described as “terrorism” by the international community — not even by the UN itself. The language used is that of “retaliation,” “security,” or “military necessity.” At most, such actions are classified as **violations of international humanitarian law**, which are treated as war crimes or breaches of proportionality — not terrorism.

Palestinian Violence and the Universality of the Label

By contrast, Palestinian violence — even when directed at military targets or framed as resistance — is **universally labeled terrorism**. From suicide bombings during the Second Intifada to rocket fire from Gaza, the label is immediate and absolute. Even **non-violent resistance** by Palestinians — such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement — is sometimes criminalized or equated with “terrorist support” by some states.

The **asymmetry is clear: Palestinians are judged by their outcomes**, regardless of context. **Israel is judged by its intentions**, regardless of outcomes.

The Role of Recognition, Sympathy, and Power

This discrepancy arises from a core political fact: **the terrorism label is not applied by legal bodies in isolation**, but by **powerful states, media institutions, and international organizations** influenced by strategic alliances and political sympathies.

- **State recognition** confers legitimacy. Israel, as a recognized state, is seen as possessing the sovereign right to use force. Palestinians, lacking full recognition and statehood, are seen as illegitimate actors — even when they invoke rights under international law (e.g., the right to resist occupation under UN Resolution 37/43).
- **Political sympathy** matters. In the West, Israel is perceived as a democracy, a regional ally, a bulwark against extremism. This creates an implicit **presumption of good faith**. Palestinians are associated with Islamism, authoritarianism, or terrorism — creating a presumption of **bad faith**. These sympathies shape not just media framing, but also legal and diplomatic language.
- **Power shields from judgment**. States with veto power at the UN, strong military alliances (e.g., with the U.S.), or economic influence are rarely subject to international prosecution or labeling. This is why terrorism, like war crimes, is often **punished only when committed by the weak**.

The Palestinian Struggle and the Enlightenment Ideal

At its core, the Palestinian demand is not only for land, sovereignty, or recognition — it is a demand for **equal application of the law**. It is the demand that **the same principles applied to others be applied to them** — whether in the right to resist, the right to life, or the right to justice.

In this sense, the Palestinian struggle mirrors the **foundational struggles of the Enlightenment**. Just as 18th-century thinkers rejected the **divine right of kings** — the notion that some rulers are above the law by virtue of birth or title — Palestinians today reject the **immunity of states** from legal accountability.

Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Kant argued that **law must apply to all equally**, or it is not law but tyranny. They argued that **sovereignty lies with the people**, not with rulers who claim it by fiat. Palestinians, too, argue that **statehood should not determine who is humanized, who is criminalized, or whose suffering matters**.

To label one bombing as terrorism and another as security — despite identical means and aims — is to reinstate the logic of aristocracy: that **some lives are sacred, and others expendable**. That some people have the right to resist, and others only the right to suffer.

The demand for consistent law — whether in applying the Geneva Conventions, prosecuting war crimes, or defining terrorism — is a demand not only for justice, but for **modernity itself**.

Conclusion: Toward a Universal Standard

If terrorism is to be more than a political slur — if it is to be a meaningful legal category — then it must be **applied consistently**. This means:

- Recognizing that **state actors can commit terrorism**, just as non-state actors can.
- Acknowledging that **civilian targeting to achieve political aims** is terrorism, regardless of the actor’s flag, religion, or strategic value.
- Applying legal definitions like UNGA 49/60 to **actions, not actors**.

Failure to do so does not only perpetuate injustice — it undermines the very idea of international law. It tells the world that law is not universal, but a weapon of the powerful. It tells the oppressed that their only crime is weakness.

The Palestinian call for equal rights, equal protection, and equal judgment under the law is not a radical demand — it is **the very essence of the Enlightenment**, and the measure of any civilization that claims to honor it.

Annex: Incidents Meeting the Strict Literal Definition of Terrorism under UNGA Resolution 49/60

Applied without the customary exclusion of state or state-supported actors.

A. Massacres (deliberate large-scale killing of civilians to terrorise and compel flight or submission)

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
A1	King David Hotel Bombing	22 Jul 1946	Irgun Zvai Leumi (Menachem Begin)	Jerusalem	91 killed (41 Arabs, 28 British, 17 Jews, others)	Bomb placed in civilian-staffed British administrative headquarters with intent to kill occupants and intimidate the Mandatory government into abandoning Palestine.
A2	Al-Khisas Massacre	18 Dec 1947	Palmach (Haganah elite unit)	Al-Khisas, Galilee	10–15 villagers killed (incl. 5 children)	Night raid bombing houses with sleeping families to ter-

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
A3	Balad al-Shaykh Massacre	31 Dec 1947	Palmach (Haganah)	Balad al-Shaykh, Haifa	60–70 villagers killed	<p>terrorise Arab villages in retaliation for a nearby incident, signalling broader intimidation during civil war.</p> <p>Retaliatory assault on village after refinery attack; orders to kill maximum adult males in homes to provoke fear and deter Arab resistance.</p> <p>Houses demolished with inhabitants inside; explicit “model raid” for depopulation to terrorise Galilee villages into flight.</p>
A4	Sa’sa’ Massacre	14–15 Feb 1948	Palmach (Haganah)	Sa’sa’, Safed district	60 villagers killed (incl. children)	<p>Systematic house-to-house killings, mutilations, and public parading of bodies explicitly designed to terrorise Palestinian population into mass</p>
A5	Deir Yassin Massacre	9 Apr 1948	Irgun & Lehi (Haganah acquiescence)	Deir Yassin, Jerusalem corridor	107–140 villagers (incl. women, children, elderly)	<p>Systematic house-to-house killings, mutilations, and public parading of bodies explicitly designed to terrorise Palestinian population into mass</p>

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
A6	Ein al-Zeitun Massacre	2–3 May 1948	Palmach (Haganah)	Ein al-Zeitun, Safed	70+ villagers killed	flight (direct trigger of the 1948 exodus). Post-capture executions of prisoners and civilians to intimidate surrounding Safed-area communities during Operation Yiftah.
A7	Abu Shusha Massacre	13–14 May 1948	Givati Brigade (Haganah)	Abu Shusha, Ramle district	60–70 villagers killed	Assault with rapes and mass grave burials to terrorise and depopulate village as part of Lod-Ramle conquest. Post-surrender shootings of young men and burials in
A8	Tantura Massacre	22 May 1948	Alexandroni Brigade (Haganah)	Tantura, Haifa coast	200+ villagers killed	mass graves to compel coastal Palestinian flight and secure Haifa.
A9	Lydda (Lod) & Ramle Expulsion Massacres	11–14 Jul 1948	Yiftach & 8th Armoured Brigades (Yitzhak Rabin, Palmach) under Ben-Gurion order	Lydda & Ramle	250–1,700 killed; 70,000 forcibly marched into exile	Indiscriminate shootings, mosque massacre (c. 200 killed), and death march in 40 °C heat to terrorise and depopu-

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
A10	Eilabun Massacre	30 Oct 1948	Golani Brigade (IDF)	Eilabun, Tiberias district	14 villagers executed	late key towns on the road to Jerusalem. Post-surrender killings documented by UN observers to deter resistance and force Christian Arab exodus from Lower Galilee. Executions after surrender; commander briefly jailed, but intent was to terrorise border populations during Operation Hiram.
A11	Hula Massacre	31 Oct 1948	Carmeli Brigade (IDF)	Hula, Lebanese border	35–58 villagers killed	Three-stage assault killing inhabitants in homes, mosque, and caves to terrorise remaining villages in the southern front.
A12	Al-Dawayima Massacre	29 Oct 1948	89th Commando Battalion (IDF)	Al-Dawayima, Hebron district	80–455 civilians (estimates vary)	
A13	Safsaf & Saliha Massacres	29–30 Oct 1948	7th Armoured Brigade (IDF)	Safsaf & Saliha, Upper Galilee	52–70 in Safsaf, 60–94 in Saliha	Post-surrender executions, rape, burning of bodies, and detonation of mosque with refugees inside to accel-

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
A14	Arab al-Mawasi Massacre	2 Nov 1948	IDF forces	Nr. Eilabun, Tiberias	14 Bedouins killed	<p>erate flight from Galilee.</p> <p>Shooting of men and village obliteration to terrorise nomadic groups into abandoning traditional lands.</p> <p>Houses and school dynamited with inhabitants inside as reprisal to terrorise Jordanian-border villages.</p> <p>House-to-house searches with mass executions and burials in graves of bound men to compel control during Sinai occupation.</p>
A15	Qibya Massacre	14–15 Oct 1953	IDF Unit 101 & Paratroopers (Ariel Sharon)	Qibya, West Bank (then Jordan)	69 villagers (⅔ women & children)	
A16	Khan Yunis Massacre	3 Nov 1956	IDF forces	Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip	275–400 Palestinians killed	
A17	Kafr Qasim Massacre	29 Oct 1956	Israeli Border Police	Kafr Qasim, Israel	49 Arab citizens (incl. 23 children)	<p>“Shoot-to-kill” enforcement of surprise curfew on returning workers to intimidate Israeli Arab popula-</p>

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
A18	Sabra and Shatila Massacres	16–18 Sep 1982	Lebanese Phalangists under IDF encirclement, flares, and entry control (Ariel Sharon held personally responsible by Kahan Commission)	Beirut refugee camps	800–3,500 Palestinian & Lebanese civilians	tion during Suez crisis. Enabled and facilitated slaughter to terrorise remaining PLO supporters and compel total evacuation of fighters from Lebanon.

B. Targeted Assassinations / Extrajudicial Killings with Terror Intent

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
B1	Lillehammer Affair	21 Jul 1973	Mossad "Wrath of God" team	Lillehammer, Norway	Innocent Moroccan waiter Ahmed Bouchiki murdered	Public mistaken-identity execution to terrorise PLO networks worldwide (classic signature of state terror campaign).
B2	Salah Shehadeh Assassination	22 Jul 2002	Israeli Air Force (1-ton bomb)	Gaza City (densely populated)	15 killed (incl. Shehadeh's wife, 14-year-old daughter, 9 other children)	Deliberate use of disproportionate ordnance in residential block to decapitate Hamas while knowingly causing mass civil-

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
B3	Mohammed Deif Assassination (July 2024)	13 Jul 2024	Israeli Air Force	Khan Yunis displaced-persons camp	90+ civilians killed (confirmed)	ian deaths to intimidate Gaza population. Strike on tent camp housing thousands of displaced civilians to eliminate commander while accepting mass civilian deaths to terrorise and break Gaza resistance. Systematic live-fire on largely unarmed demonstrators (including medics and journalists) to terrorise Gaza population and compel cessation of border protests.
B4	Gaza "Great March of Return" Sniper Campaign	30 Mar 2018 – Dec 2019	IDF sniper units under explicit rules of engagement	Gaza-Israel fence	223 killed, 13,000+ injured (many permanently maimed)	

C. Settler Violence (non-state actors with frequent state impunity)

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
C1	Murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir	2 Jul 2014	Jewish extremists (settler background)	East Jerusalem	16-year-old abducted, beaten, burned alive	Retaliatory live-burning to terrorise Palestinian residents of Jerusalem after murder of three Israeli teens.
C2	Duma Arson Attack	31 Jul 2015	Amiram Ben-Uliel & Hilltop Youth network	Duma village, West Bank	18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh burned alive; both parents later died	Firebombing of sleeping family's home with "Revenge" graffiti to terrorise Palestinians and accelerate land takeover ("price-tag" doctrine).
C3	Wadi as-Seeq Torture Incident	12 Oct 2023	Armed settlers wearing military-style uniforms	Wadi as-Seeq, Jordan Valley	Multiple Palestinian shepherds tortured for hours (cigarette burns, beatings, urination, attempted sexual assault)	Prolonged sadistic torture to terrorise shepherd communities into abandoning grazing lands.
C4	April 2024 Settler Rampage (after Benjamin Achimeir murder)	12–15 Apr 2024	Hundreds of armed settlers	11 Palestinian villages (al-Mughayyir, Douma, etc.)	4 Palestinians killed, dozens wounded, hundreds of homes/cars torched	Collective punishment pogroms on unrelated villages to terrorise entire districts and compel submission or flight.

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
C5	Huwara Rampage ("Pogrom")	26 Feb 2023	Dozens of armed settlers (organized via social media)	Huwara, Nablus District, West Bank	1 Palestinian killed, ~400 injured (incl. shootings), widespread property destruction (cars/homes torched)	Coordinated revenge attacks on village after settler deaths, explicitly to terrorise and punish Palestinian population ("price-tag" escalation post-election). Attack on Palestinian harvesters and international observers to intimidate farmers, disrupt livelihoods, and prevent access to lands during harvest season.
C6	Olive Harvest Assault on Afaf Abu Alia	Oct 2025	Israeli settlers (multiple assailants)	Unspecified West Bank village (olive groves)	1 beaten unconscious (Afaf Abu Alia hospitalized); journalist assaulted	Cruelty to livestock as proxy intimidation to terrorise herders and compel economic abandonment of grazing areas.
C7	Lamb Torture Incident	Nov 2025	Israeli settlers (filmed group)	Palestinian-owned pen, West Bank	Animals tortured/killed (lambs in pen)	

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
C8	Attacks on Turmus Ayya, Sinjil, Ein Siniya (Post-Prisoner Release)	17 Jan 2025	Ultranationalist settlers ("Fighting for Life" group)	Turmus Ayya, Sinjil, Ein Siniya, Ramallah District, West Bank	Property damage (multiple homes/vehicles burned); no deaths reported	Arson and vandalism timed to spoil Palestinian celebrations over prisoner releases, aiming to provoke fear and assert dominance.
C9	Um al-Kheir Shooting of Awdah al-Hathaleen	Jun 2025	Settler (Yinon Levi, EU-sanctioned)	Um al-Kheir, South Hebron Hills, West Bank	1 killed (peace activist Awdah al-Hathaleen); relatives arrested by IDF	Targeted shooting of activist followed by military arrests of victims' family to terrorise Bedouin community and facilitate land seizure (ongoing displacement campaign). Shooting and beating of father/son
C10	Assault on Shadi a-Tarawah and Family	May 2025	Israeli settlers	Qa'un Plain or similar, West Bank	1 injured (Shadi a-Tarawah shot, lost leg); teen son assaulted	during field work to intimidate farmers and restrict access to agricultural lands.

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
C11	Raid on Khilet a-Dabe' Village	31 May 2025	Israeli settlers with flocks	Khilet a-Dabe', West Bank	Property/livelihood damage (raiding with animals); no direct casualties	Herding raids to overrun fields and terrorise villagers into fleeing, part of systematic land encroachment.
C12	Killing of Goat Kids	25 May 2025	Israeli settlers	Unspecified West Bank herding area	Animals killed (goat kids)	Slaughter of livestock to economically terrorise and displace herding families from traditional lands.
C13	Nahhalin Olive Farmer Assault	24 Oct 2025	Israeli settler with IDF support	Nahhalin, Bethlehem District, West Bank	1 severely assaulted (58-year-old farmer); investigated by IDF	Joint settler-military beating of farmer during harvest to provoke fear and restrict Palestinian access to groves.
C14	Beit Lid Industrial Estate and Bedouin Attack	Nov 2025 (recent days before Nov 14)	Large crowd of masked settlers	Beit Lid (industrial estate) and nearby Bedouin sites, West Bank	Property torched (trucks/buildings); attacks on soldiers; no Palestinian casualties specified	Organized arson and assaults to send message of unrestrained reach into urban/rural areas, intimidating civil-

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
C15	Hamida Mosque Arson	Nov 2025 (Thursday before Nov 14)	Jewish settlers	Hamida Mosque area, West Bank	Property damaged (scorch marks on walls/floors); no deaths	ians and even state forces. Arson on place of worship with graffiti threatening military (“We’re not afraid of you”) to terrorise Muslim communities and assert ideological supremacy. Nighttime torching of vehicles and structures to terrorise residents and disrupt daily life amid escalating harvest-season violence.
C16	Burqa Village Arson Attack	15 Jul 2025	Israeli settlers (late-night raid)	Burqa, east of Ramallah, West Bank	Multiple cars/homes destroyed by fire; no injuries reported	
C17	Mughayyir al-Deir Expulsion Campaign	May 2025	Masked settlers (with IDF presence)	Mughayyir al-Deir, east of Ramallah, West Bank	Multiple injured (stoned, shot at); full village displacement	Harassment, stonings, and shootings forcing second displacement (post-1948 refugees) to terrorise and empty

No.	Incident	Date	Perpetrator(s)	Location	Casualties	Why it meets the definition
C18	Taybeh Christian Town Attacks	Jul 2025 (last week before Jul 17)	Israeli settlers	Taybeh, West Bank (Christian town)	Property attacked (fires near 5th-century church, homes); no casualties specified	village for land grab. Arson near historic church and home as assaults to intimidate minority Christian Palestinians and expand settler control. Revenge beatings after Palestinian attacks, but used to terrorise broader community with impunity. Family-targeted violence during routine activities to provoke fear and restrict movement in rural areas.
C19	Sinjil Attacks (Post-Murders)	Jul 2025 (Friday before Jul 17)	Israeli settlers	Sinjil, West Bank	Injuries from assaults; 6 arrested/released	
C20	B'Tselem-Documented Teen Assault and Father Shooting	Jun 2025	Israeli settlers	Unspecified West Bank area	1 shot (father lost leg); teen assaulted	

These 32 incidents (18 massacres, 4 assassinations, 20 settler attacks) unambiguously satisfy every element of UNGA Resolution 49/60 when the definition is applied literally and without the political exemption normally granted to state or state-protected actors. They collectively caused thousands of civilian deaths and were intended — as admitted by perpetrators, commanders, or subsequent Israeli inquiries — to provoke terror, intimidate populations, or compel political/territorial outcomes.